

What We Can't Do Alone, We Can Do Together

By Mac Legerton

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We often forget how much we need and rely on other people. None of us learned to feed ourselves, walk, or tie our shoes on our own when we were children. We hear so many messages that tell us we can and should make it on our own, and we start to believe it. Such a statement just isn't true. We need each other. We rely on each other and are incomplete without each other.

Many of us understood the truth of this message when we came together in the 1980s to improve our county of Robeson. This county is a very special place. Robeson is the most "ethnically diverse" rural county in the entire United States, according to the book *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*. This characteristic was true in the 1980s, and the county is even more diverse today. In the 1990s, Robeson experienced a large influx of Latino workers, who were recruited and hired to work in the meatpacking industry. Consequently, you are more likely to meet people of other ethnic or racial groups in Robeson County than anywhere else in rural America.

Thirty people of various races and from all walks of life gathered together in Robeson County in 1980 to form the organization Center for Community Action. We held community meetings throughout the county and met with other members of the three major races: European American (white), Native American (Indian), and African American (black). We asked people numerous questions such as:

- What are the major causes of poverty in the county?
- How are people discriminated against because of their race, their sex, or their level of income?
- What policies and laws need to be changed or adopted to improve political, social, and economic opportunities and treatment of all people?

We collected the information from these discussions and compared our findings to United States Census Bureau information and other published data on our county and state. We made a list of all of the people and organizations in the county that could help change and improve Robeson. As we progressed over the years, more people surfaced and came forward as leaders and contributors, some of whom we had not known before.

Besides making a commitment to organize and unite people of many races and walks of life, we realized that we had to work on more than one issue at the same time. All of the problems and solutions that we identified and selected related to increasing equality and social justice in our county. We knew that it would take about twenty years to accomplish

everything we hoped for, but we were committed for the duration. We wanted to correct the historical imbalance in our local society by combining the strategies of community organizing, grassroots empowerment, research, coalition building, and policy change.

The major social-change needs and goals that we identified over the first three years of work fell into the following categories:

- Equitable and more professional racial representation in county and municipal government
- More professional elected officials and administrators
- Court and law enforcement reform—leading to a more balanced and fair system with more diverse leadership
- Education improvement and school reform
- Public assistance reform—with better and broader delivery of services to the poor, sick, and underprivileged
- Employment reform—better wages, benefits, and conditions
- Economic development—more locally owned, small businesses
- Agricultural reform—alternative crop production with less use of pesticides and herbicides
- Environmental protection of the land, water, and wildlife
- Cultural and multicultural curricula for our schools
- Youth and adult leadership development

We understood from the beginning that the effort would take the hard work and cooperation of many groups, organizational leaders, and thousands of ordinary citizens to be successful. Different coalitions and collaborations were developed to address different issues. If the approach and work that I am describing seem overwhelming, they often were. For many years, and up to the present, our social-change work has been an around-the-clock job. Change rarely comes easily for us as individuals, families, communities, institutions, systems, or cultures.

In the 1980s, we faced great conflict and turmoil during this process of change in Robeson County. When controversial events unfolded and conflicts intensified, crises erupted that often spiraled out of control. Anger, fear, and insecurity can cause humans to harm one another. The lives of several leaders of the social-change movement, including my own, were threatened. There were six major public leaders of the reform: two Indian, two African American, and two white men. They were attorney Julian Pierce, John Godwin, state representative Dr. Joy Johnson, Rev. Sidney Locks, Rev. Bob Mangum, and myself. Julian Pierce, director of Lumbee River Legal Services, was murdered while running for public office. The serious political struggles that we experienced in the 1980s were similar to the perils and traumas of war. Both the anticipation of desperately needed change and the resistance to that change can cause people to act in harmful ways. These are the burdens of the human struggle for freedom.

Because of the civil rights struggles of the 1980s and the blessings of new opportunity and freedom, Robeson County is now a better place. Some successes that we have achieved follow.

We now have the three major races represented on the county commission board, the school board, and the delegation to the North Carolina House of Representatives. We accomplished these results through redistricting (reshaping election districts), by creating different districts where each race had greater opportunities to elect its own representatives. Robeson County may have the most ethnically diverse rural government in the United States today because of our accomplishments, which we have realized together. The challenge now is to make our political system even more inclusive, creating opportunities for our new Latino neighbors to have a place at the decision-making table.

In Robeson County, we now have a public defender system, one of the few such systems in rural North Carolina. Our urban counties have public defender offices that represent low-income defendants, but nearly all of the rural counties do not. We have a more balanced court system that has both a district attorney office and a public defender office working as advocates for their clients. We have lawyers and judges of the three major races who respect one another and their clients.

We now have one countywide school system—the Public Schools of Robeson County. Before 1975, we had six separate school systems in the county, and we were down to five systems by 1988, when the North Carolina legislature allowed our citizens to decide by vote whether to merge the schools into one system that had fair and equitable funding for all our children. Faced with the serious need to improve education, administrators and leaders are learning how to improve schools and our students' educational performance.

We now have Lumber River State Park, Luther Britt Park, River Way Outdoor Adventure and Education Center, and other ecological treasures for public enjoyment. Back in the 1980s, our county was selected as the site for two multistate toxic and low-level radioactive waste facilities. Both the citizens and local governments successfully fended off these proposals after spending millions of dollars and organizing thousands of people to stand in opposition for eight years. Our parks and environmental programs provide new incentives and strategies for protecting and promoting our land, water, and air resources so that we will never again face similar toxic threats.

With its cultural and ecological diversity, Robeson County is a microcosm of our state and nation. If we can join together here and be successful at improving our community, we can inspire others who face similar challenges. We can also keep learning and keep challenging ourselves to do more.

- We are learning to evaluate who in our communities is not afforded equal opportunity and treatment.
- We are learning to open our eyes and see how all people's interests are not being equally protected and equally promoted.

- We are learning how to reach beyond the boundaries of the familiar and work with others for the common good of all.
- We are learning how to be wise advocates, not blinded by our own passions—even for good—in ways that **build** bridges between people and institutions, instead of burning them.

In the end, freedom is not so much what we are free from as what we are free for. Yes, freedom is about having rights. But more important, freedom is about being responsible for how we use, expand, and share these rights.

It is my hope that as a part of their citizenship, more and more young people in North Carolina will participate in efforts to improve the quality and the equality of life in their communities. In the end, the energy and commitment of young people represent a unique opportunity to create a larger, more cooperative effort to improve our state, our nation, and the status of our human family and our planet.

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